

By Frank Start - VE3AJ, as printed in Hi-Q, February, 1978

Story from Frank, VE3AJ

A long time resident of the Lakehead recently became a 'silent key'. One of the old-time brass pounders who made life miserable for many radio listeners in the vicinity of Prospect Avenue, when he opened up with 5-1/2 kW of spark to work a W/T equipped lake vessel.

Born in Dublin 90 years ago, (circa 1886) G. N. McCormack arrived in Port Arthur about 1922 and joined the staff of the Marconi-operated station. All the operators on the large grain and coal carriers were using VBA as a meeting place when ashore in the Lakehead. When Mac, as he was called, was on watch and not too busy, he could be counted on to spin a yarn and sometimes a tall tale. He sailed the deep sea for many years and when on the 'Western Ocean' run (that's the North Atlantis Ferry Service) he had rather an odd experience.

It was in the spring of the year when icebergs were a menace to navigation around the Gulf of St. Lawrence. The ship was taking the shorter route through Belle Isle Strait bound for Liverpool. They went through the usual drift ice and fog in the strait and in the evening heard a fog horn. The Old Man (Captain or Master as you will) was in the pilot house and after some studious moments said, "It must be Belle Isle, its on the port side? So we must be going in the right direction." (There was no DF or Radar in those days.) The night was dark, (as it usually is) the fog was thick (how else?) And the air was cold and wet (normal).

To add to these pleasant conditions, Spark, (the nut who operated the wireless equipment) came up on the Bridge and said, "Battle Harbour's radio reports heavy ice and bergs in the vicinity." So the Old Man gave instructions to put two men in the crow's nest, two men on the fo'c's'le-head and to call him if anything turns up, then he went below and to bed.

The First Officer who was taking over the watch said, "Aye Aye Sir," waited until the OM had gone below then said a number of unkind words about the Captain, the ship and it's owners, before setting the watch and sending for a mug of tea. The darkness, the fog and the cold weather continued far into the night. The look-outs reported icebergs in many directions. This continued for hours and hours. The officer on watch rang the telegraph for half speed ahead. The Quartermaster sweated at the wheel dodging the ice. Suddenly, the crow's nest reported an extra large berg dead ahead!

The First Officer, always calm and cool, leapt from his easy chair and shouted, "Starboard, two points!" and rang for 'Full Astern', and shouted, "Call the Old Man." He then took a quick look in the direction of his favourite life boat.

The Quartermaster, in the meantime had turned the wheel around enough times to take the ship back to Montreal, turned to the Officer and said, "Sir, she don't answer!" (Nautical for unable to steer.) The Mate then answered in typical nautical language, which will not be recorded. The Skipper now arrived on the scene and took command. The ship was slowly approaching the iceberg despite the efforts of the engine going full astern. (No four wheel brakes.) The huge berg now slowly took shape through the dense fog and the look-out on the fo'c's'le retreated to a

safer location. The ship's stem slowly cut into the slush ice about the berg, the irresistible force of 100,000 tons of ship continued to force the ship right into the iceberg, which now towered over the bow. There was a noise of crushing and the falling of ice splinters on the deck. The forward motion finally stopped and then there was ghostly silence.

Even in the pilot house, where the air had suddenly gone blue with the arrival of the Captain, all was quiet. The Captain rang the telegraph to "Stop", and in a clear calm voice which could be heard down in the stokehold, suggested to the First Officer that he look alive and get the fore peak tanks sounded. This was done and the ship found undamaged, not taking water-yet.

The Captain rang for half speed astern. There was no visible sign of the ship moving. He then rang for full astern and slowly, ever so slowly, the ship started to move. They could feel the motion on deck BUT, the iceberg was still in place and following the ship as the latter was going astern!

This was strange, most strange! The Old Man got on the phone to the engine room and in a firm salty tone suggested that everyone down in that department get off what ever they were sitting on and put a few more turns on the throttle and screw down the safety valves. There was an immediate surge of power as five thousand horses strained to break loose. The ship picked up speed in its backward course but the berg continued to follow, equally as fast. In desperation, the Skipper rang, "Stop," and then, "Full Ahead."

And that was the explanation for the strange sight, seen two weeks later, when a large steamer entered the Mersey River, pushing a monstrous iceberg.